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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ROME 000725

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/06/2016
TAGS: PGOV IT ITALY NATIONAL ELECTIONS
SUBJECT: ITALY: POLLSTERS GIVE EDGE TO PRODI BUT DON'T
DISCOUNT BERLUSCONI

REF: A. ROME 141
¶B. ROME 466
¶C. ROME 276

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor David D. Pearce for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: A collection of five Milan-based pollsters
agreed that PM Berlusconi's effective campaign had closed
much of the gap with opposition leader Romano Prodi, even if
they were split over whether this momentum would carry
Berlusconi to victory on election day. Recent polls give
Prodi a lead ranging from one to five percentage points.
Berlusconi's hope is pinned on remotivating his base of
support, disillusioned by five years of a stagnant economy.
In fact, Italy's poor economy is Berlusconi's chief handicap
and foreign policy appears to count little. Many Italian
voters remain undecided how they will vote, but this includes
many who will simply not vote and others who know which
coalition they plan to support but not which party within
that coalition. This makes it difficult to predict what a
future government would look like regardless who wins, but
especially if the center left forms the next government. END
SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Poloff and Milan's Acting Pol/Econ chief met March
2-3 with five Milan-based polling organizations. In separate
meetings, three predicted a very close victory for
center-left Union coalition candidate Romano Prodi, and two
gave the advantage to Prodi but said that PM Berlusconi's
well-focused campaign had made the race a dead heat. All
agreed that Berlusconi was running a very effective campaign
and that Prodi's lackluster performance and divided coalition
had hurt him. The consensus view is that longer term
political, social and especially economic trends were working
against Berlusconi.

WHAT DO THE POLLS ACTUALLY SAY?

¶3. (SBU) Late February and early March polls show the
center-left's (CL) lead over the center-right (CR) ranging
from one percentage point to five percentage points. The
Berlusconi-financed Euromedia poll conducted on February 24
shows the one percentage point difference. The most recently
published poll, conducted by the relatively bipartisan
Eurisko gives the CL a 51.4 percent to 46.4 percent lead in
the Chamber of Deputies and a 50.5 percent to 47.0 percent
lead in the Senate. (Note: As a result of electoral reform in
late 2005 (REF A, B), votes are tabulated differently in the
Chamber and the Senate, which has resulted in parties running
in slightly different groupings in the two chambers. This
explains the different results. End Note.)

¶4. (C) Paolo Natale, lead pollster for Polimetro, conducted a
survey on March 1. His still unpublished survey asked
respondents to predict who they thought would win the
elections. The results in percent were: CL (45.2), CR
(34.5), uncertain (20.3). This is a slight improvement for
the CL compared to late February results but much lower than
results from polls conducted last year. When asked March 1
if they planned to vote CL or CR, the results were: CL
(43.6), CR (35.8), uncertain (20.6). The trend mirrors that
shown for the previous question. Given Italy's recent
electoral reform, however, this is no longer the relevant
question since electors do not vote for the coalition but for
an individual political parties (REF B). This large
"branding gap" between the CL and the CR is one of the
reasons why Berlusconi changed the electoral law.

¶5. (C) Polimetro also asked voters to indicate for which
party they would vote in the Chamber and in the Senate, which
is the actual decision voters will face on election day. Of
those expressing a preference, the CL leads the CR by 51.1
percent to 47.9 percent in the Chamber and by 50.9 percent to
47.8 percent in the Senate. The trend shows that the CR
gained substantial territory through mid-February but that
the race more-or-less stabilized in the last two weeks of
February. Polimetro shows 34.8 percent of potential electors
remain undecided and predicts that roughly half of those will
abstain on election day. It predicts the majority of the
remaining lean toward the CL. Other polls show undecideds

representing between 25 and 30 percent of the electorate.

PREDICTIONS

¶6. (C) Euromedia's Alessandra Ghisleri was the most positive
regarding the CR's chances for victory. She admitted that
Berlusconi still trailed but said momentum favored the CR.
She also reminded Poloff that governments are formed in
parliament and not at the ballot box and said that the binds
that hold together a coalition disappear after the election
passes. She predicted that a split result, one in which the
Chamber and Senate each go to different coalitions, favors
Berlusconi forming the next government (REF A). Giacomo
Sani, whose most recent results give the CL a scant 2
percentage point advantage, argued that the race is too close
to call and concurred that momentum favors Berlusconi. The
question is whether that momentum is sufficient to bring him
the votes he needs.

¶7. (C) Stefano Draghi, who is also a Senate candidate for the
Democrats of the Left (DS), was most strident in his
prediction of a CL victory. He cited long-term trends and
dissatisfaction with the economy as insurmountable barriers
for Berlusconi's admittedly superior campaign to overcome,
but provided no data to support his claim. Nicola Piepoli,
who works for the Council of Ministers but not for Berlusconi
the candidate, provided similar reasons to predict a CL
victory. Forza Italia's Lazio party coordinator who works
closely with Piepoli in Palazzo Chigi told Poloff that
Piepoli is a guru with an excellent instinct for Italian
politics. Polimetro uses a mathematical model that combines
the results of stated intentions to vote, historical
comparisons of voting intentions with actual results, and
perceptions of general voter sympathy to forecast results.
Based on Polimetro's model, Natale predicted the CL would win
in both houses. With the majority premium in the Chamber,
the CL would have a comfortable advantage of 340 to 277
seats. He also predicted the CL would win in the Senate,
despite probable CR victories in the important swing states
of Friuli Venezia Giulia, Lazio and Puglia. The CL would win
the remaining swing state, Piedmont. Given his prediction
that the CL would win big in Toscany and Emilia Romagna, he
forecasts the CL would have a 160 to 149 seat advantage in
the Senate. His results do not include the results for
members of parliament voted abroad or the seven Senators for
life.

¶8. (SBU) Twelve members of the Chamber and six members in the
Senate will be voted by Italians abroad (REF B). The
pollsters said they have no idea what to expect since this is
the first time such elections will be held. However, the
consensus is that results will favor the CR, who gave
Italians abroad the right to vote. Some explained that the
fact most Italians abroad emigrated from Southern Italy also
favors the CR. Italy's seven Senators for life generally
favor the CL.

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CAMPAIGN FOR THE UNDECIDED VOTER/MOTIVATING THE BASE
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¶9. (C) Polls show that between 25 and 35 percent of Italian
voters remain undecided. At least half will abstain and the
other four pollsters shared Natale's view that the majority
of the remainder leans to the left. Draghi pointed out that
many undecided voters know if they plan to vote CL or CR but
are unsure which party within the coalition they will
support. He claimed the strong preference expressed for the
CL, in general, augurs well for Prodi's coalition. Piepoli
explained that the Italian voter, who historically chose
between a large Communist party and the Christian Democrat
is generally more sympathetic to the left than to the right.
He said a major reason Berlusconi defeated Francesco Rutelli
in 2001 was because Berlusconi had induced the Northern
League to rejoin his coalition whereas Rutelli did not
attract the Communist Renewal (RC) party. This year, Prodi
has reached out to the far corners of the left for support
and does not face that problem. Draghi also noted that the
"political trend" has been working against Berlusconi and
cited a poor economy as a primary factor.

¶10. (C) The five pollsters generally agreed that Berlusconi
was running a better campaign than Prodi, who is hampered by
a divided coalition and poor communication skills. They said
Berlusconi is fighting to motivate his base of support, which
includes many voters disillusioned by Italy's poor economic
performance over the past five years. Berlusconi's campaign
slogans rhetorically ask Italians if they want more illegal
immigration, higher taxes, communists and no-globals in the
government and a return to instability. With his visit to
Washington, Berlusconi has trumpeted his important role on
the world stage versus Italian Communist Party (PdCI) leader
Oliviero Diliberto's support for Hamas and burning of the
U.S. and Israeli flag. The pollsters say Berlusconi is

trying to scare the disillusioned voter into returning to the
voting booth instead of staying home. Ghisleri and Sani
thought this might work. The others agreed it was a good
tactic, but insufficient to win.

WHAT MOTIVATES THE ITALIAN VOTER

¶11. (C) Draghi and Ghisleri distinguished the Northern and
Southern voters. They said the Northern voter is generally
more ideological and faithful to the party tradition.
Southern Italy is still heavily influenced by clientelism,
where electoral "tour operators" frequently deliver votes to
one or another party based on perceived benefits. This type
of voter is more susceptible to the bandwagon effect since
the goal is to deliver votes to the winner who will be able
to provide the most benefit. Clemente Mastella's UDEUR
Party, which has its base in Campagna is the paramount
example.

¶12. (C) More concretely, all the pollsters agreed that many
Italians are proud of Italy's new role on the world stage,
but that foreign policy has little to no effect on the voter.
 Natale said the CL is winning because of concern for the
economy, the precarious nature of the job market and the
energy crisis. Piepoli cited a deep-seated jealousy against
Berlusconi as a strong motivation for CL voters. Many
Catholic voters are concerned about values and vote for
parties favored by the Vatican. Ghiseli said many DS voters
have abandoned the DS because of the BNL banking scandal, but
they probably remained within the CL coalition. The
pollsters were divided on whether the flap over former
Minister Calderoli's printing of t-shirts emblazoned with the
controversial comics of the Prophet Mohammed had affected
voter preferences. Natale, however, showed that support for
the Northern League had dropped from 4.3 to 3.6 percent since
the event went public. He says a corresponding increase in
support for Forza Italia means those voters did not leave the
CR.

INSIDE THE CENTER LEFT

¶13. (C) The relative strength of the parties inside the two
coalitions will determine the importance of the CL's more
radical wing in a potential future government. Whereas some
polls had given RC eight percent of the vote, Polimetro and
Euromedia show it has slipped to below seven percent. PdCI,
the Greens, UDEUR, the Rose in the Fist and di Pietro's
Values Party also face possible exclusion from parliament if
they do not overcome the two percent hurdle for entering
parliament. Ghiseli cited evidence that many voters who are
disillusioned with the DS have migrated to the Rose in the
Fist, a combination of Radicals and a Socialist splinter
group. In any case, with so many CL voters still undecided,
it remains unclear who among the small parties would have
influence in a possible Union government.

COMMENT

¶14. (C) COMMENT: With national elections only five weeks
away, the race has tightened considerably. Prodi still holds
the edge, but momentum appears to be in Berlusconi's favor,
and a large number of voters remain undecided. Even more
unpredictable is what a CL government would look like if it
were to win. END COMMENT.

¶15. (U) This cable was coordinated with ConGen Milan.
SPOGLI